

Tainted well is closed

Perth Amboy asks for DEP meeting

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Perth Amboy yesterday temporarily shut down a contaminated drinking well and also turned on a new experimental well to take its place, following reports of growing contamination at the Runyon Watershed.

City officials also began to arrange an emergency meeting with the state Department of Environmental Protection Agency and two Old Bridge industrial firms charged with polluting the watershed to discuss three possible ways to halt spreading chemical and metal pollution.

Further, the Perth Amboy City Council has given special environmental attorney Joseph Maraziti Jr. authority to pursue legal remedies.

"The city has authorized me to aggressively protect the quality of the city's water supply and seek recovery of costs and damages as a result of the contamination," Maraziti said yesterday.

The 1,260-acre watershed at the Old Bridge-Sayreville border supplies drinking water to 40,000 Perth Amboy residents. South Amboy is a water customer of Perth Amboy.

Perth Amboy officials began taking a series of steps following reports that a plume of industrial contamination is spreading through two key wells — known as 5 and 6 — which together represent about 30 percent of the city's total drinking water supply.

Perth Amboy officials stressed there is no apparent immediate threat to the city's drinking water, which continues to meet state and federal standards.

"Things are happening very quickly," said Fletcher N. Platt of Killam Associates, an engineering consulting firm hired by the city. "We're trying to schedule a meeting with the the DEP as soon as

Continued from Page A-1

possible."

In a confidential report obtained by The News Tribune, Platt told the city that at Well No. 6, there is an expansion of a plume of a cancer-causing agent — the volatile organic compound (VOC) chlorobenzene.

Well No. 6 was shut down yesterday, but city officials said that the action was because of a regular shutting down of various wells, and not linked to news of the spreading pollution.

The city also maintained that they turned on the new experimental drinking well, called a collector well, whose capacity can replace Well No. 6's one million gallons a day output three times over, was part of a longterm plan.

They said the temporary shut-down of Well No. 6 and the opening of the new well occurring yesterday was a coincidence.

Platt said the emergency meeting, tentatively scheduled for next week, will allow the parties to discuss three options on how to handle the spreading contamination.

The options include:

- Continued testing, observation, and use of Well No. 6 and nearby Well No. 5, threatened with zinc contamination which may exceed drinking water standards.

- Requesting the two Old Bridge firms, CPS Chemical Co. and Madison Industries Inc., to provide further cleanup treatment of the water in wells 5 and 6.

- Shutting down both wells, and using the new collector well as a permanent replacement.

The last option is both the most viable but also the most problematic solution, city officials said. In effect, it puts the city between a rock and a hard place, city consulting engineer Platt explained.

"It is undesirable to deliver water which contains any concentration of contaminant," Platt said. "This concern leads to the answer that Wells No. 5 and No. 6 should be shut down.

"However, if Wells No. 5 and 6 are shut down, the potential for further spread of the contamination is increased," Platt said.

"This is a very difficult situation. The city would prefer not to have its residents subjected to any levels of contamination. Even though all the finished drinking

water has met state and federal drinking water standards, there are very small traces of [pollution.]"

Spokesmen for CPS and Madison yesterday disputed the city's contention that a plume of contamination was spreading, but both said they would attend an emergency meeting to discuss solutions.

"Of course we would [attend a meeting]. I'd like to know what's going on," said Hyman Bzura, president of Madison Industries, found responsible by courts for zinc pollution at the watershed.

"My belief is there is no migration of zinc," he said. As far as organics (VOCs), we are unfamiliar with organics. CPS is responsible for that."

Philip Meisel, president of neighboring CPS, called the city's report about rising chlorobenzene dangers in the two drinking wells "baloney."

"That's totally untrue," said Meisel, whose company the courts found responsible for volatile organic pollution at the watershed.

"We have the data," Meisel maintained. "The organics are diminishing very rapidly, it's not spreading, it's not a threat to anything, and it didn't come from us."

Meanwhile, city Business Administrator Larry Pollex yesterday said months of planning allowed them to turn on the new collector well yesterday without suffering a loss of water capacity.

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